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# Look the Other Way

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# LOOK THE OTHER WAY

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts  
Digital Production Arts

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by  
Karl Richard Alexander Jahnke  
May 2016

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Accepted by:  
Professor David Donar, Committee Chair  
Dr. Donald House  
Dr. Brian Malloy

## **Abstract**

*Look the Other Way* is a 2d animated short film based on the concept of a bird character evading a rising water level. The work is inspired by the artists Don Hertzfeldt, Bruno Bozzetto, and Matt Groening. The concept and production of the film spanned approximately four months.

## Artist Statement

*Look the Other Way* is about evading a changing ecological landscape. The story follows a bird content with its life until it is forced to abandon its home due to rising water levels and journeys from sanctuary to sanctuary. The water is an encroaching inconvenience that will not stop and the bird must face the inevitable. *Look the Other Way* is not only a story about a bird's journey, it is a personal work satirizing the human collectives' evasion and inaction relating to our own changing ecological landscape. I feel it is important to acknowledge the inevitable. If we as a species cannot acknowledge a problem, and see a future past our own generation, then we will never begin to envision a sustainable solution that will last longer than ourselves.

*Look the Other Way* was inspired by the works of Don Hertzfeldt and his themes of dark absurdity animated with minimalistic characters in a desolate white background. Bruno Bozzetto, with his simplistic bumbling Signor Rossi character animated closely to a UPA style, additionally influenced the narrative structure of the film. Matt Groening's Binky character design is directly related to my own bird character.

I see birds as simple and funny creatures with their graceful flight and bumbling hops as they peck the ground looking for food. Seen as stupid, e.g. birdbrained, birds have the ability to escape almost any situation. Water sustains all of life, but it is also a great destroyer, it can erode away any material given time. I use both these dichotomies to create a dark and whimsical narrative in the film.

## Acknowledgements

With the utmost sincerity, I want to express my gratitude to my wife, Krista, for her love and support in all of my endeavors and to my son, Korbin, for his laughter who motivates me to keep creating.

I would also like to thank Dr. Donald House for the opportunities he has presented to me throughout my academic career at Clemson University. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Brian Malloy for his cheerful and positive nature.

Finally, I would like to recognize Professor David Donar for being a beacon of creativity and his support in the creation of the film *Look the Other Way*.

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## Background

My first experience creating digital artwork was at the age of 8, in 1986, when I animated on a Tandy TRS-80 computer using Basic and draw commands. The ability to use math and logic to create moving images on a screen felt amazing. Rewriting code and copying and pasting written elements to create new animation was my first introduction to editing and understanding timing. Since that time I have used post-it, paper and VHS cassette, Hypercard, 16mm film, LunchBox, Flash, Maya, and 3DS Max, just to name a few, to visually express myself in the medium of animation. Mark making, traditional drawing, and making films gives me the freedom to express my ideas in ways that others can freely interpret. Rarely do I create work that I want to be understood in a singular way. I want my work to be thought over and digested and give a viewer insight into a subject from a different perspective.

As a child I was always interested in the movement of things, not from a mechanical or engineering aspect, but by the paths objects and animals took through time. Birds have been a constant inspiration, as they move through the air in erratic or graceful lines. On the ground, bird's movements make me giggle with their clumsy hopping or unpredictable walking. I have studied this strange dichotomy of erratic and graceful and

it has left me with an awkward sense of humor focusing on the whimsical and macabre.

In many ways my work is reactionary to my personal experiences. The production and completion of a project is proportional to my attitude/mood/success/failure of the previous project. *Look the Other Way* is largely a reaction to the collaborative work *Rats*, a DPA 8600 course, requiring to be a 3d animation, rendered in a photorealistic manner, and a binary social interaction, left me with exhaustion. The challenges of compromising on narratives, visual styles, timing and pacing, diminishes the sense of authorship of the work. Relying on others to complete work related to a project in a given deadline is a hurdle when the abilities of individuals can vary drastically. Diverse personalities can also reduce the sense of ownership in a work. To escape that exhaustion, I chose to do a character animation about a simple bird evading the inevitable. A bird on the surface is easily understood to be stupid, e.g. birdbrained, but for me, I find humor in bird that has the ability to fly but is trapped no matter where it flies to. This character is a personal satirical allegory of the human collective, and how it is reacting, by not taking action to the changing environment.

The objective of the animation is to use my personal style of humor to poke fun at a very serious issue, ignoring climate change. It is not to

discuss the causes or the science, surrounding climate change. The creation of animation is a difficult and time heavy endeavor. *Look the Other Way* is the longest running 2d animation I have created. The ability to complete an animation with a personal voice, and a sense of personal authorship and with meaningful content in itself is significant.

The significance of this work is not its global statement, but in the construction of the work by me. It my first work given personal predefined stylistic rules. The work is a testament to a discipline, in an already craft heavy medium, animation. Given the opportunity to author a personal work is a challenge and is an important step as a growing artist.

## Influences

The project, *Look the Other Way*, is artistically inspired by the works of Matt Groening, and influenced narratively and cinematically by Don Hertzfeldt and Bruno Bozzetto. Don Hertzfeldt's minimalist style and dark humor inspires a nihilistic humor in my own narrative. Bozzetto's, *Allegro Non Troppo*, is the reason I animate. It is Bozzetto's work that introduced me to animation aside from commercial animation aimed at children's entertainment. His autobiographical character Signor Rossi charmingly introduced me to topical adult themes, with a unique character.

Bozzetto's work is derivative of many other styles and narratives, his Signor Rossi shorts are animated in a style similar to David Hilberman's United Productions of America (UPA), and *Allegro Non Troppo* is a reactionary piece satirizing Disney's *Fantasia* [5]. Many of the Rossi cartoons mimic Disney's Goofy cartoons that are narrator driven: *Goofy Goes to the Beach*, *Goofy Goes on Vacation*, and *Art of Skiing* (figure 2.1). These types of stories are similar to character vs environment that I am mimicking in the work *Look the Other Way*, although on a much smaller scale. Groening's character design and satirical social commentary in his panel comic work also influenced the project. I was exposed to Groening's work early in my life, living close to Los Angeles, where Matt Groening resides. I would visit the local comic shop and meet many of the comic book artists as they travel up and down the California

coast doing signings. I met Matt Groening at such a signing in 1986 and was inspired by his characters right away. I spent a great deal of time emulating his character designs when I would sketch. This emulating by sheer habit inspires my own character designs today.



Figure 2.1 *Art of Skiing* [1]

Much of Hertzfeldt's work focuses on the mundane, through repetition, the theme is exaggerated to absurdity and sometimes with lethal consequences. In the work, *Look the Other Way*, I attempt to emulate this focus on pure shapes and let the audience focus on the consequences of the bird's actions. Bozzetto and Groening's interests are in social commentary, with Bozzetto focusing on urban expansion, and Groening

focuses on the use of authority. Hertzfeldt and Bozzetto's works both have messages that go beyond the narrative presented. Hertzfeldt's work, *World of Tomorrow*, is a story about a six year old girl meeting her older self who is searching for a memory. The narrative is not simple, and many questions are left unanswered by the end of the film. Bozzetto's *Allegro Non Troppo* is a collection of shorts that all pose questions about happiness but with the end of each short I am left wondering if the characters are truly happy with their situation.

Bozzetto's work communicates a common message that society will attempt to change who you are. In *Allegro Non Troppo* the artist character is pressured to create differing styles of works by various social groups in the theatre where the animation is being presented. His Signor Rossi character faces social obstacles dealing with crowds, traffic, and typical urban congestion. A common motif of Hertzfeldt's films are innocent actions can have grave consequences. In the work *Wisdom Teeth* the action of the short unravels when a friend casually asks to remove a stitch from from a character's mouth. The common theme of Groening's work is simply, grown ups are corrupt and stupid [6].



Figure 2.2 *Wisdom Teeth* by Don Hertzfeldt [7]

The messages that dominate all of these artists work, and is a large driving force for my project, is social commentary. In the Signor Rossi works of Bozzetto, the environment is the medium in which he uses irony and exaggeration to satirize Italian 'la dolce vita' culture. Hertzfeldt's work, *Rejected*, uses exaggeration and dark humor to satirize an artist's descent into madness in the process of creating commercial work. In the comic *Life Is Hell*, Groening uses ridicule to satirize the not so brilliant decisions of adults.





Figure 2.3 *Signor Rossi at Sea* [4]

With the exception of Hertzfeldt, the works of Bozzetto and Groening are an insight to the social and political history of the time of their creation thus making their work timely. Hertzfeldt's works, I personally feel, are timeless, with his subject matter being larger in scope. As example, *The Meaning Of Life*, is an animation about our place in the universe. This timelessness is something that I would like to achieve in my own work in the future. Groening's work, I personally feel, will be tied to the late 1980's and whole of the 1990's simply because of his commercial success with the animated sitcom the *Simpsons* and *Futurama*. Bozzetto's Signor Rossi animations are timely simply because of his satirical exposition on Italian 'la dolce vita' culture.

Hertzfeldt's absurdist and surrealist work can be linked to the work of David Lynch and Stanley Kubrick. Hertzfeldt admittedly is a "filmmaker who happens to animate", [3] and is influenced by live action films. The works of David O'Reilly can also be linked to those of his mentor, Hertzfeldt, and the influences of O'Reilly can be seen in the film *World of Tomorrow*. Bozzetto's work during the 1960's and 1970's are similar to the UPA, *Mr. Magoo* and *Gerald McBoing Boing*, although the background elements are much more detailed than the typical UPA animation. Bozzetto's, *Allegro Non Troppo* is a reactionary work to Disney's *Fantasia* [5]. Personally I feel I am an animator who makes films. My interests are in the use of narrative social commentary, character movement, and timing through editing. Like my influences, my inspiration is from artists within my generational time period.

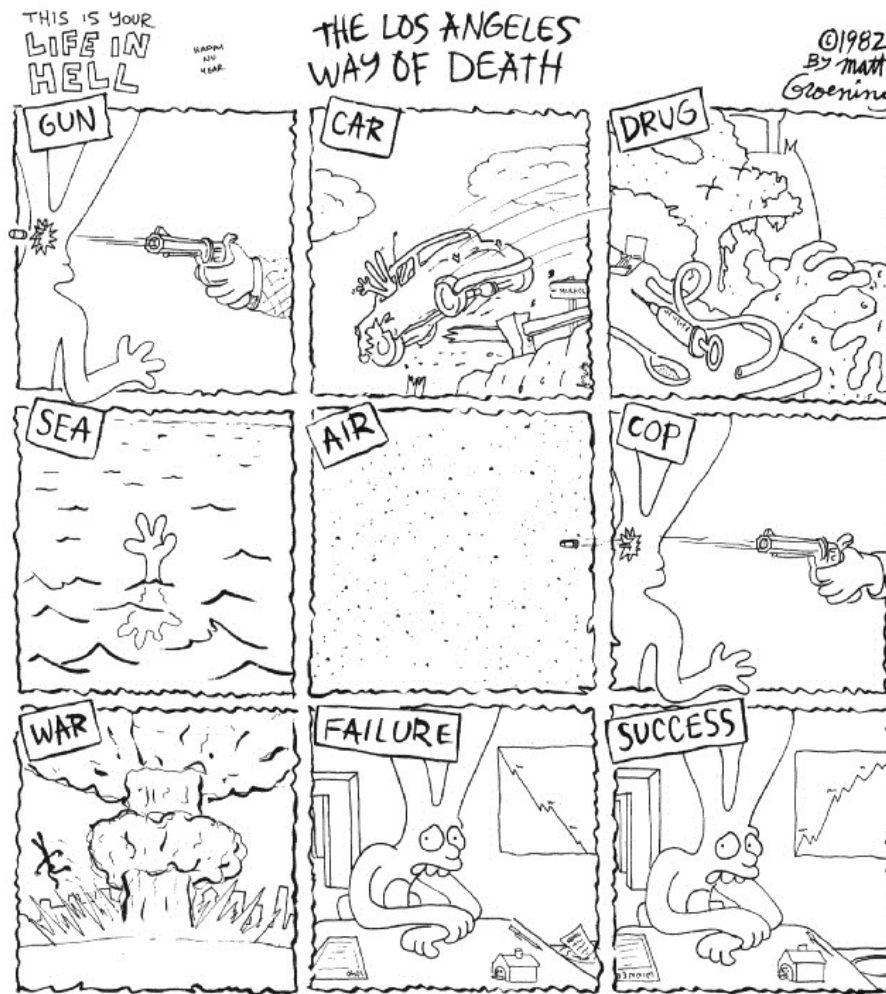


Figure 2.4 *The Los Angeles Way of Death* [2]

Groening's work relates to contemporary science and geography in many of his panel comic works. In figure 2.4, geography, social commentary, environmentalism, and personal reflection are all present in this singular work. Hertzfeldt's latest work, *World of Tomorrow*, considers a world slowly giving way to erosion from continued digital transfer and copying of information. Bozzetto, with his short work *Bolero*, composed by Ravel, in

the feature animation *Allegro Non Troppo*, a twisted dark vision of evolution is considered as a metamorphosis of creatures experience war, religion, and changing landscape (figure 2.5).

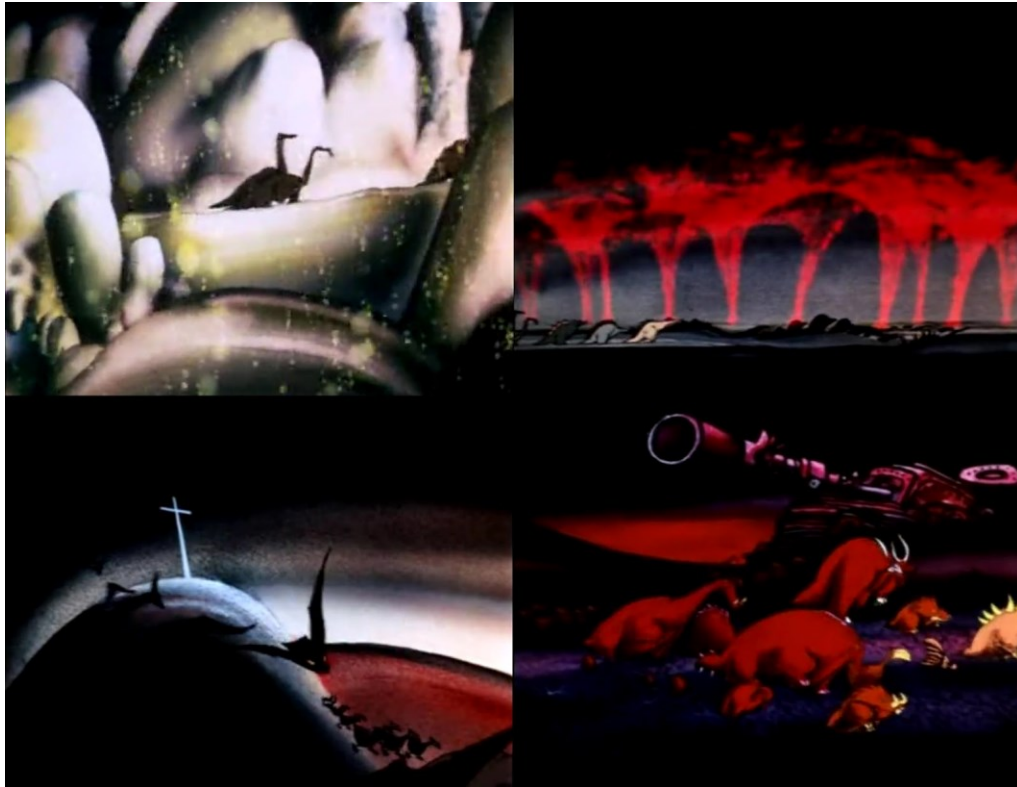


Figure 2.5 Stills from *Bolero*, *Allegro Non Troppo* [8]

Hertzfeldt's work, with its absurdity and his well timed repetition makes the humor rhythmic. Hertzfeldt himself has stated [3] he will spend months working on the timing of his character's actions. I find the repetition of the actions hilarious. Bozzetto, although his work is not as absurd as Hertzfeldt's, it does lean to an exaggerated narrative. I find exaggeration incredibly humorous. I find social commentary, be it political or

demographic criticism, amusing. I feel this way because I am numb to a lot of comedy. It takes a great deal of over the top exaggerated physical or emotionally charged painful moments to genuinely make me laugh out loud. Hertzfeldt's absurdist work fills this need for exaggeration. Bozzetto puts a mirror to the human condition and the satirical statements fill me with joy. Groening's panel comics deliver short bursts of witty and pithy humor. Unfortunately, I feel his produced commercial animation are too long and drawn out. Groening has stated that "Fox would rather mess with the show and have them fail, than allow creators independence and let them succeed"[13], and this could be a reason why I enjoy his comic panel work over his produced work.

As an animator timing is a large factor in the success of a work, panel comics on the other hand are free of the limitations of timing. Panel comics, like Groening's, use the viewer's imagination to dictate timing, motion, and sound. The reader of a panel comic has much greater control over the pacing of the reading and viewing experience. With animated films, the pacing must be dictated by the animator, I feel that Hertzfeldt does this extremely well. Animation is strictly a linear time based medium, where panel comics are able to be read forward, and backward if the viewer chooses. When reading Groening's work, I frequently go back to previous panels because I may have missed a previously foreshadowed

joke. Hertzfeldt uses repetition to slow down the delivery of jokes, while panel comics are somewhat limited by how much can be repeated, although there are exceptions when repetition itself is the joke.

I find color, form, and theme of works affect my mood and reaction.

Hertzfeldt's use of black and white amplifies the silhouette of his characters' actions, exaggerating, and making the work funnier. His sterile depictions of gore are personally shocking. Contrasting Hertzfeldt, Bozzetto does not stick to one palette. Bozzetto uses colors to benefit the animation and the narrative. He will use large saturated colors in an urban scene to create tension, or use soft pastels to emphasize delicate emotional moods. This masterful use of color is inspiring and uplifting. Groening's use of line weight, direction, and white space effectively lead the eye around the panel. Groening's effective use of eye direction decreases the amount of time it takes to read the image and personally exaggerates the impact of his pithy humor. In figure 2.6 the image is full of information, but the two distinct elements are binky and the teacher both subtly have larger white space silhouetting them.

## Life In Hell by Matt Groening



Figure 2.6 *School Is Hell, Lesson 11* by Matt Groening [9]

The atmosphere of Hertzfeldt's work is spartan, with little to no background, this can be seen in figure 2.8, from the film *The Meaning of Life*. This lack of background creates a world of personal unease.

Bozzetto's atmospheres are varied. In the short *Bolero*, from the feature animation *Allegro Non Troppo*, the atmosphere is dark, violent, and nebulous, seen in figure 2.8, this atmosphere is beneficial to the piece because it is a birth and evolution of life piece. When Groening bothers to

place his characters into an environment the work suffers from kenophobia. Words fill the space either labeling objects or people or words from the characters dialogue. In all three of figures 2.7, 2.8, and 2.9, it can be seen how each artist approaches a similar narrative and the atmosphere they each create.



Figure 2.7 *The Meaning of Life* by Don Hertzfeldt [10]





Figure 2.8 *Bolero, Allegro Non Troppo* by Bruno Bozzetto [8]

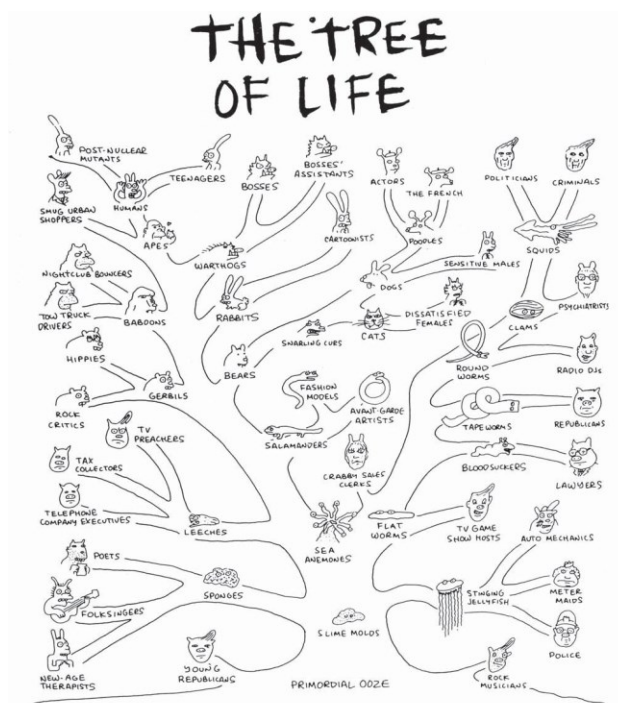


Figure 2.9 *The Tree of Life* by Matt Groening [11]

All of these artists use minimalistic line as a common trait between them, as well as social commentary narratives. All of these are similar traits in my own work when I choose to work in the medium of animation or mark-making. All of these artists deal with the human condition and the struggles humans face, be they small or large.

Bozzetto's work is by far the most varied and mature (artistically). He works in a variety of styles and his narratives can be character driven, environmentally driven, or surreal. Despite Hertzfeldt having not been trained to draw traditionally [12], much of the success of his animation is

because of the timing/editing and narrative pacing and how it all fits cohesively. He has spoken at length about how long he will spend meticulously timing a shot for maximum impact, like a good comedian rehearsing the timing [3]. I also believe he has a natural talent for noticing micro-movements in his characters unlike Bozzetto's exaggerated character movement. Groening differs from Bozzetto and Hertzfeldt in that the work that has most inspired me, is his flat and non-animated comic work. Unlike Bozzetto and Hertzfeldt, as a young child I emulated or in some cases copied Groening's characters. This emulation has created traits in my own character design work like circular eyes, cylindrical noses, and triangular philtrum.

*Look the Other Way*, is an incorporation of the works by Matt Groening, Don Hertzfeldt, and Bruno Bozzetto. I emulate Don Hertzfeldt's minimalist style and dark humor. My narrative is a topical adult theme that Bozzetto's work has inspired me to create. Additionally, Matt Groening's character designs are a driving force behind the design of my own bird character.

## Methodology

The process for creating *Look the Other Way* is not revolutionary in the history of contemporary animation. I began with a simple idea, and followed a tried and tested process of moving from storyboarding, to animatic, to animation, to editing, to adding sound, to producing a master digital film. This is not to insinuate that the process did not have its hiccups along the way to its final output.

The idea of *Look the Other Way* came from a simple sketch that has been lost to a hasty cleaning of a desk. Although the physical inspiration was lost, the mental image remained. The sketch was of several bird creatures living sustainably in their holes and a pool of water encroaching, a tagline, “sustainability leaves nothing for a rainy day”. I drew several of these bird creatures, in their holes, or in floating islands for several days. Then, promptly let the idea go. Several weeks passed and a new semester of school had started. It was this new semester that presented me with the opportunity to finally work on a project I would call truly my own.



Figure 3.1 original bird character sketches

With the opportunity to do an individual project, I embraced this chance to create a digital 2d animation. Immediately the idea to do a work involving my bird character sketch came to mind. I brainstormed gags in conversations with my colleagues. After several conversations, I had a soft list of gags I wanted the bird character to encounter and began the process of thumbnailing the individual shots, the resulting thumbnails are represented in figure 3.1.

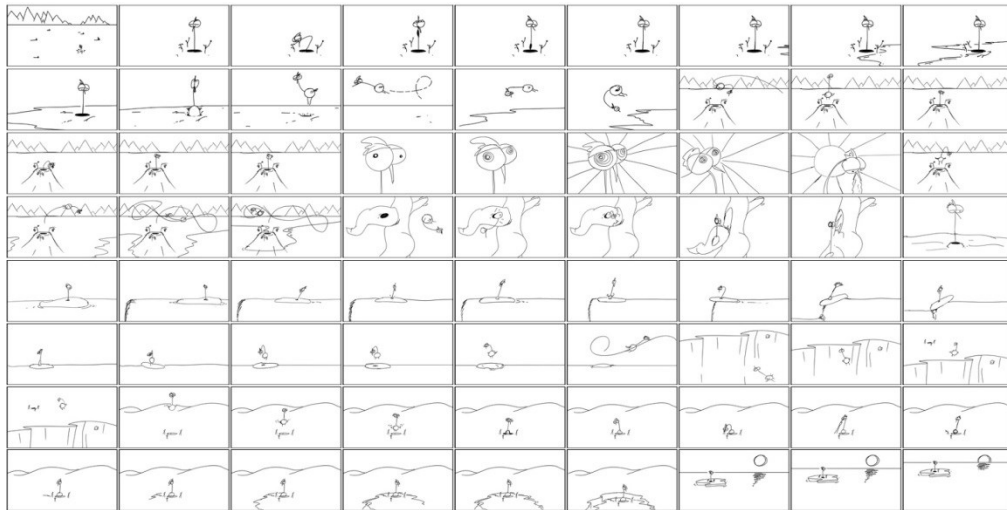


Figure 3.2 Thumbnailed storyboard

With thumbnail images I immediately timed out a rough animatic. I knew while creating the thumbnails there were problems with the story, but with an animatic I could see exactly why shots did not fit well together through visual hook ups from shot to shot, and line of action. Working digitally in Adobe Photoshop the thumbnails made creating an animatic a fairly simple process compared to the traditional approach of having to scan in a traditional medium.

Before I revised the animatic I began to experiment with stylistic choices for the final look of the film. I created a short list of restraints that would dedicate and limit my freedom and keep the look of the film grounded.

The list is:

1. Line weight could not change in an element.

2. Only flat color or 2 color gradients could be used.

3. No frame blending or blurring of elements.

With these rules, the look of the film would represent a blending of my artistic influences. Following the rules I experimented with color with two of the animatic frames represented in figure 3.3 and figure 3.4

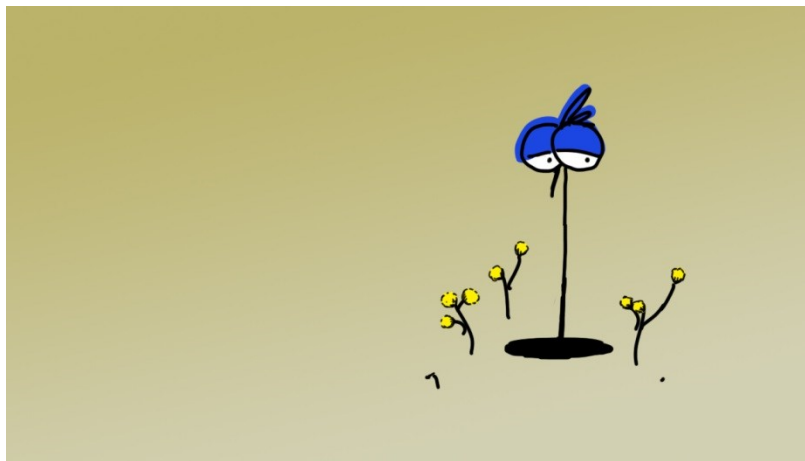


Figure 3.3 Color study of animatic frame, shot 1

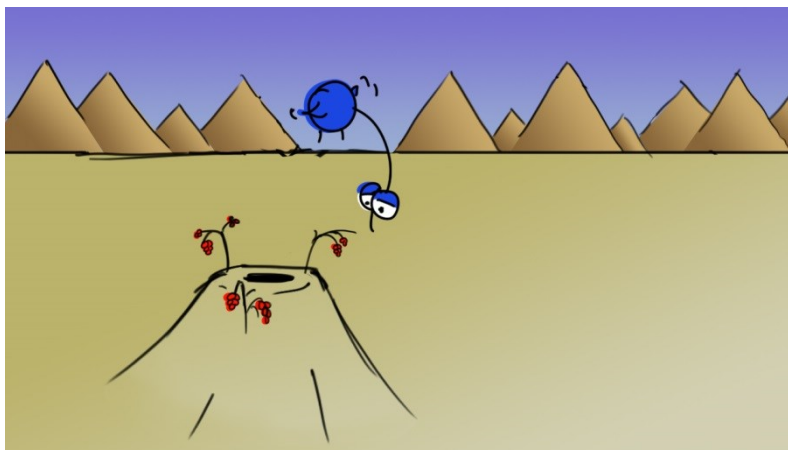


Figure 3.4 Color study of animatic frame, shot 3

The greatest challenge in following these stylistic rules was the tree in shot six. The tree lacking some texture element considering the size of the tree in the shot left me uncomfortable. Adding a texture to the tree would break the stylistic rules because it would create a complex gradient, ruining the naive aesthetic. The figure 3.5 and 3.6 are examples of an attempt to play with texture to see if I could create a tree that fit stylistically. Figure 3.7 is a final frame of the film with the simple two color gradient used to fill in the space of the tree.

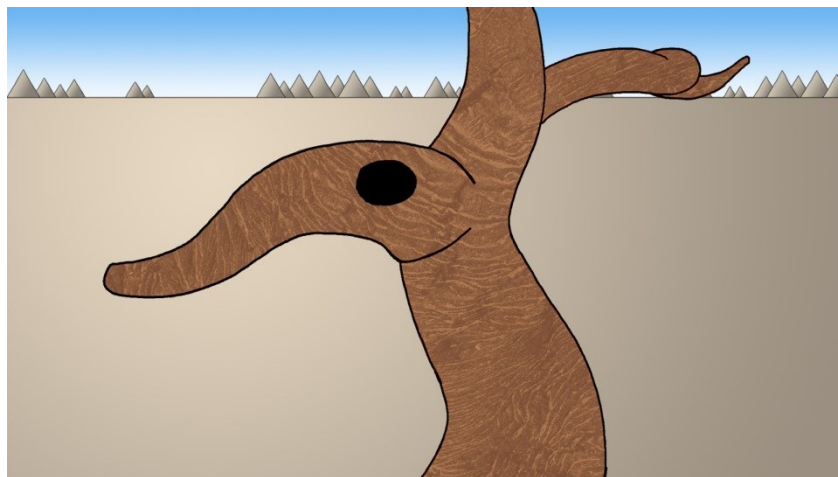


Figure 3.5 Tree with overlay texture



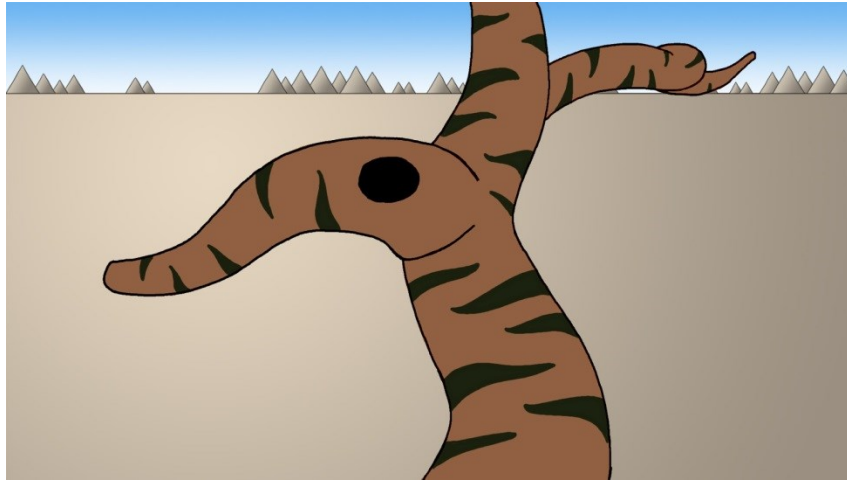


Figure 3.6 Tree with painted stripe texture

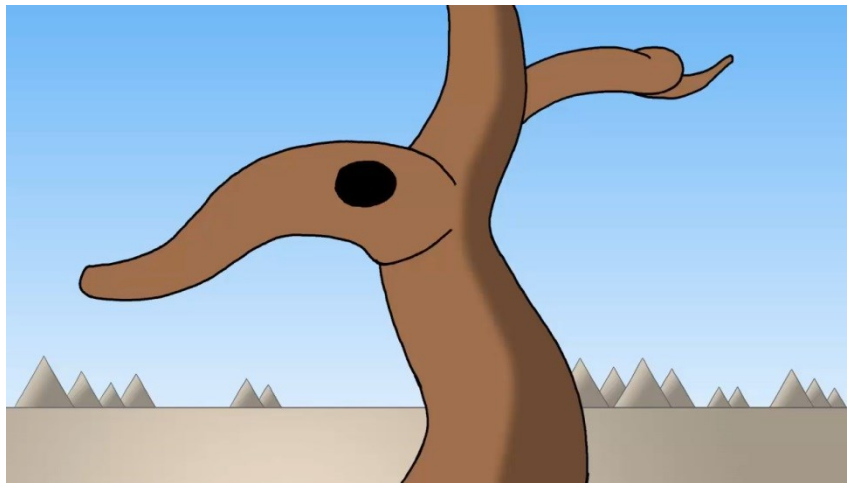


Figure 3.7 Final tree with two color gradient

Content with the stylistic rules I had set forth I returned to revising the animatic. I created additional thumbnails to focus on poses and revised the timing between actions to create a more pleasing sense of motion. In total I completed three timed out animatics that I ultimately felt conveyed the essence of the story well.

From the beginning of the project, I knew I would work with a former colleague of mine, Jeff Tackett, for the sound. I sent Jeff a copy of the animatic to gauge his reaction, and he agreed to work with me on the sound. Understanding the political nature of my animation and knowing Jeff's taste for early 1970's music, I asked Jeff to use Harry Nilsson's, *Me and My Arrow* from the feature animation *The Point* as a basis for the music. I did not want to pressure Jeff to rush the music, so I left it in his hands while I continued to the next milestone of the project, animation.

I began rough animation, using Adobe Flash CS5, with the straight-ahead method, drawing one frame and then tracing that frame with only my imagined goal in mind, as opposed to the pose-to-pose method which is drawing the in between frames of two extreme drawings. I used this method from shot one and working through the entire film in order. Working straight-ahead, I feel, brings my animations more spontaneity and life. I find working straight from the animatics and copying poses slows the output of work, and also inhibits any whimsical animation discoveries that may occur. The rough animation was created on two's, effectively twelve frames per second. As I completed shots I would showcase them to my peers for critique. I would write this criticism down and continue animating through to the end. Once I completed the rough animation, I began to revise the timing or completely redraw the sections

based on the criticism. It took approximately one and half months to complete the rough animation.

With rough animation done, the timing of the gags and movements of the objects and characters is solid. At this point in the production of *Look the Other Way* any sense of fun creating the work is over. Moving to final animation and coloring is a labor intensive task of copying myself.

Creating animation straight-ahead while bringing whimsy and spontaneity, also allows for objects or characters to be drawn smaller or larger over time. To keep the proportions of the bird character correct I used three circular shapes that I would place similar to where they belonged on the rough animation, two circles for the eyes, and one for body. I would trace these circles then move to the next frame of the animation.

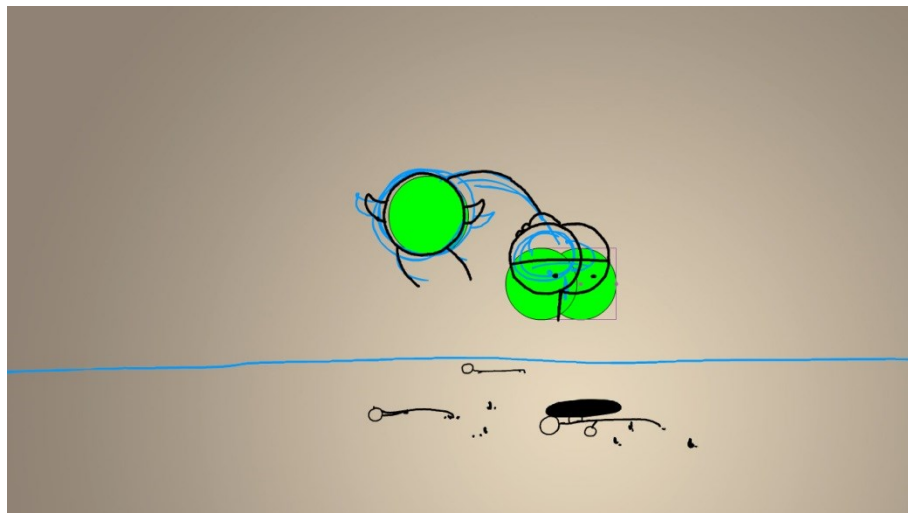


Figure 3.8 Green circles used to maintain volume of bird character

Completing the colored version of the animation took approximately one month. Again the animation was shown to colleagues and professors for final criticism. This criticism was digested and I began working to resolve the issues that I felt needed to be dealt with to make the piece stronger narratively. For the most part the changes were small and working digitally, many of the tweaks or adjustments would only take a few minutes. Some changes required additional drawing, and took more time.

With the final visual elements completed, I turned my attention to working with Jeff on the sound. With my direction to use *Me and My Arrow* as inspiration he had completed a three part melody for the entirety of the film. With melody in place we had a base to build Foley on. For much of the Foley I envisioned melodic motivated sound. This type of Foley can be heard when the cymbals crash as the sun sets, or a down pitched tuba as the bird arcs through the air. Finding a mix between Foley and background music was a slight challenge but finally completed, the sound and visuals could be combined into one master video file.

The following figures represent frames from the twelve shots from the film.

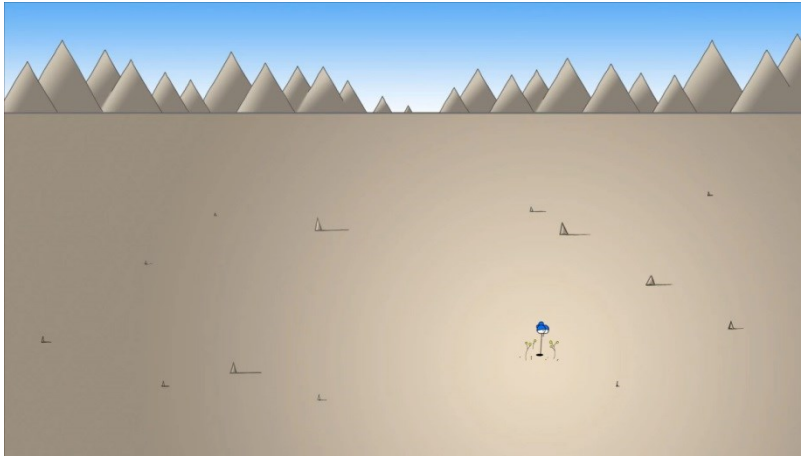


Figure 3.9 Shot 1: The bird content in his hole

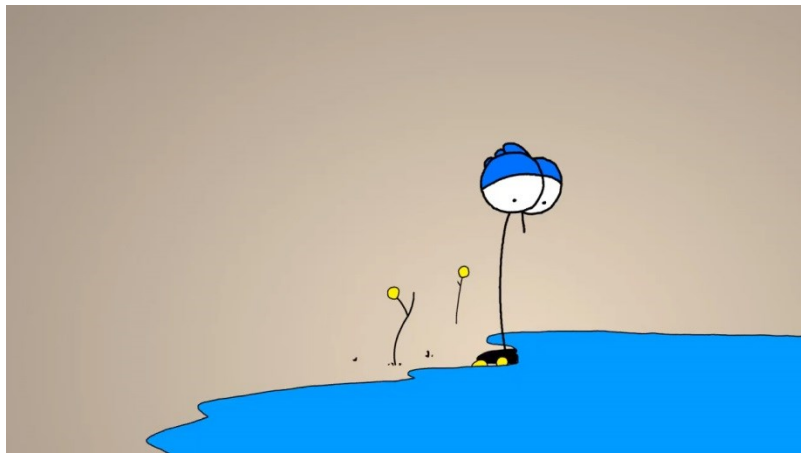


Figure 3.10 Shot 2: The bird is surprised by encroaching water

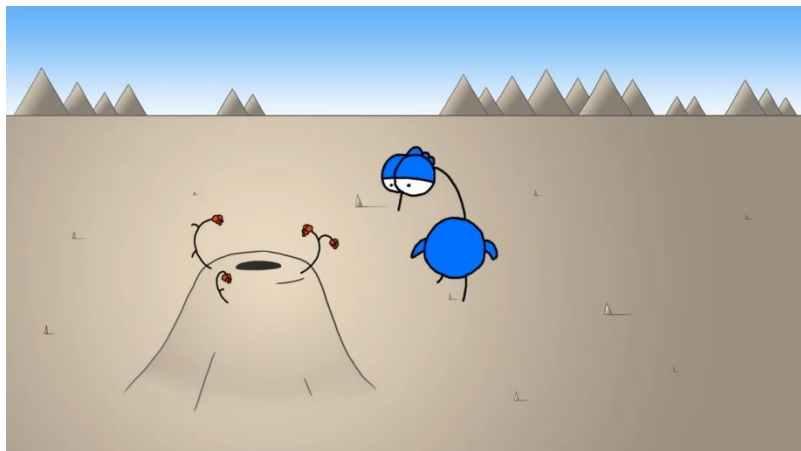


Figure 3.11 Shot 3: The bird finds a new home



Figure 3.12 Shot 4: The bird enters a berry induced psychedelic trip

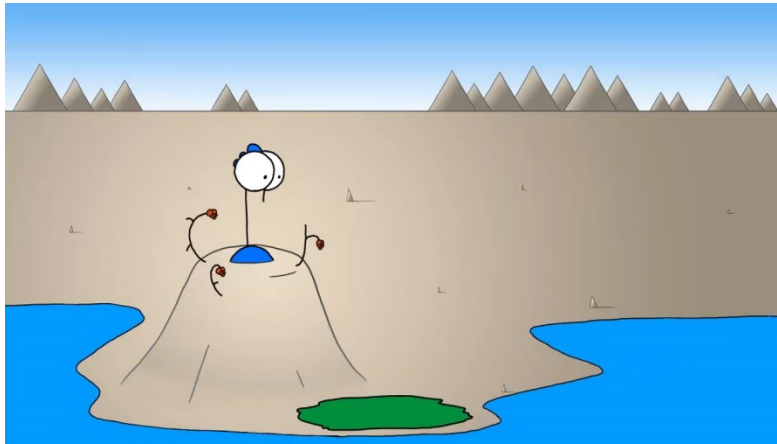


Figure 3.13 Shot 5: The bird sees water invading his second home

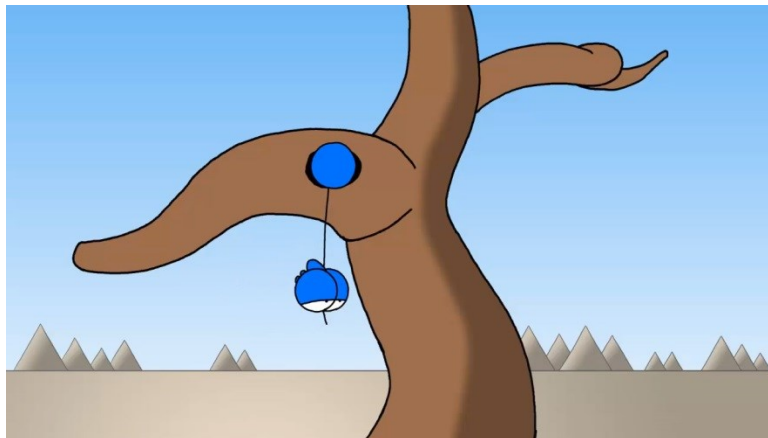


Figure 3.14 Shot 6: The bird stuck in a tree

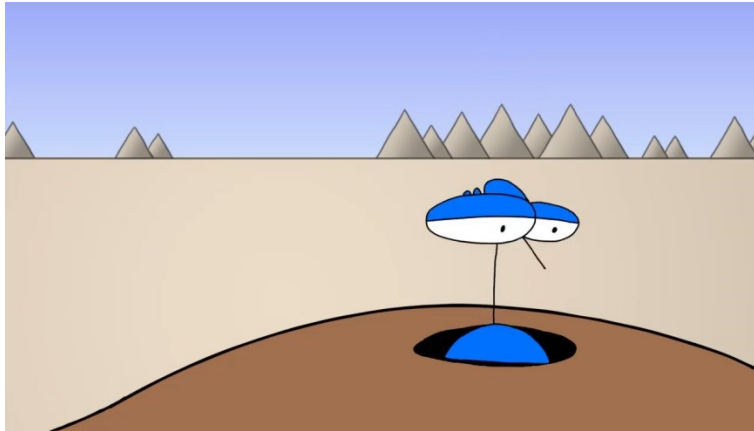


Figure 3.15 Shot 7: The bird lands in river

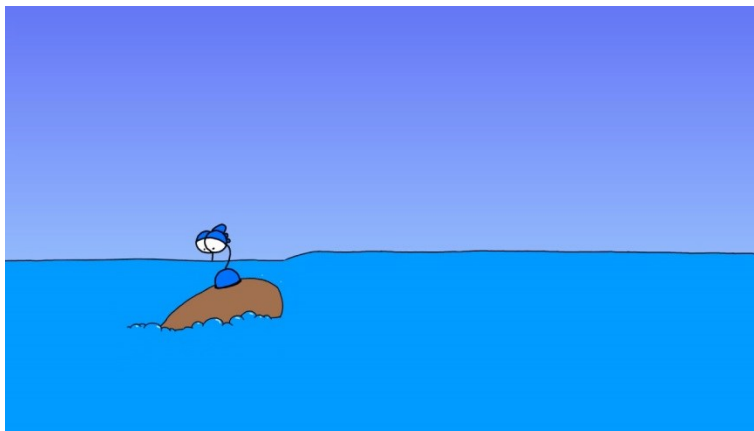


Figure 3.16 Shot 8: The bird is saved by rising water level

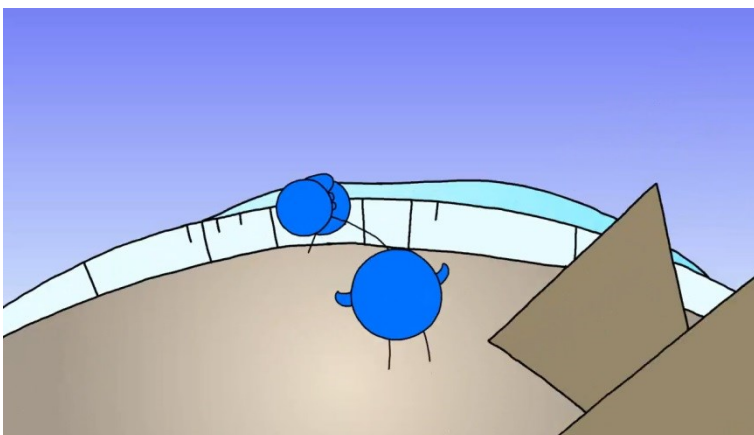


Figure 3.17 Shot 9: An epic fly over of the world

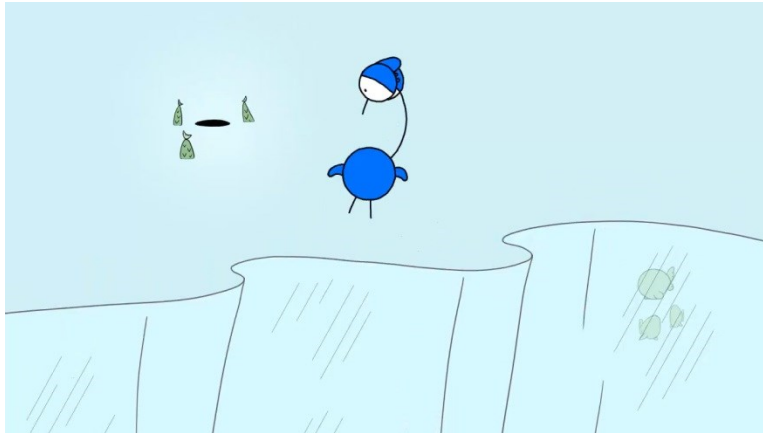


Figure 3.18 Shot 10: The bird sees a potentially new sanctuary

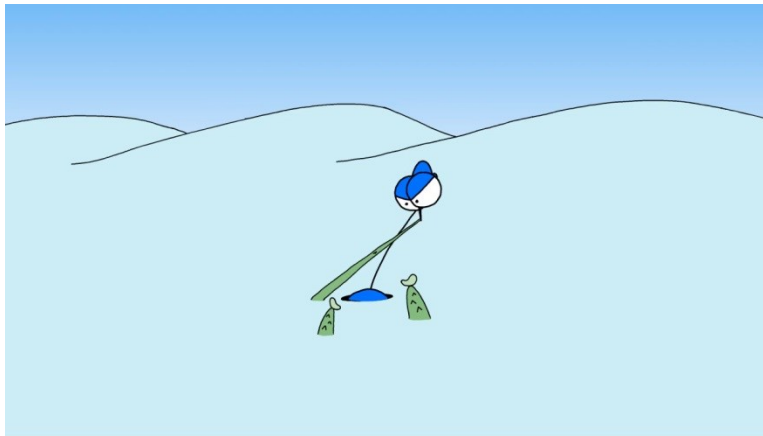


Figure 3.19 Shot 11: The bird attempting to grab a frozen fish

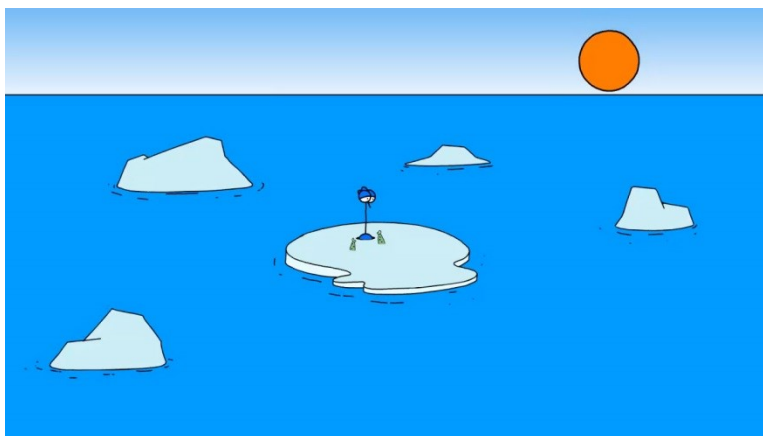


Figure 3.20 Shot 12: The final setting of the sun



## Conclusion

I view the work *Look the Other Way* as a personal success. I set out to complete a short 2d animation with a very stylistic look and I believe I have accomplished my personal goal. I feel the film succeeds in using sardonic humor to raise awareness of climate change. Although the work has undergone heavy critique from colleagues and professors, I feel the work is wholly my own vision, and it is told in my visual voice. Completing the animation itself has given me the confidence and motivation to continue working in 2d animation.

The strength of the work lies in its pure shape style and the naiveté makes the work approachable. By setting out strict stylistic rules, and sticking to them, it gave me a clear focus through the production of the work. I hope that I have created a work that has a few laugh-out-loud moments. Anytime a joke gets a laugh, I must view that as a success.

As I view *Look the Other Way* a personal success, it does not mean there were not challenges to overcome. The waterfall scene of shot six did not immediately read visually as a dangerous predicament for the bird. Adjusting the horizon line from the original location at the middle on the screen to the bottom of the screen solved this problem. With the horizon line lower the waterfall reads as higher and the viewers' position lower.

The solution to this problem did not occur until the very last revision of the film. The attention I spend on horizon line during the preproduction process will increase because of this single issue. During the middle of production when I was combining shots I encountered the issue of the backgrounds being combined with the animation frames before editing. This was a technical oversight how production frames moved into the postproduction process. I changed how I exported animation frames and the workflow of the compositing to final frames. For any future projects I will take care of how frames move from production to postproduction.

For the next stage of Look the Other Way, I will take the principles of animation I have learned and apply them to the creation of an interactive game. I plan on using the narrative of water destroying a bird's habitat and applying it to the principle game and level design. I would like to evolve non-interactive viewing animation to the interactive medium. Interactive media and game design have always been a passion, and I would like to explore the medium of game, and the medium of animation, and tie them together with strong narrative. I would also like to explore the casual gaming audience and the relationship with social commentary.

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